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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [NATO](#) [IT](#) [AF](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: SECDEF MEETING WITH ITALIAN PRIME MINISTER SILVIO  
BERLUSCONI, FEBRUARY 6, 201...

Classified By: Alexander Vershbow, ASD/ISA for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (SecDef) met with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during an official visit to Rome on February 6, 2010. SecDef thanked Berlusconi for Italy's pledge of more Italian troops for operations in Afghanistan and assured him that the creation of RC-SW will not intrude on Italian operations in RC-W. Berlusconi pledged Italy's full support for sanctions efforts against Iran, sharing SecDef's assessment of the dire implications should Tehran successfully develop nuclear weapons. Berlusconi provided Italian insights on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, encouraging strong American leadership. SecDef said the issue remains a high priority for the Obama Administration. In relation to the Abu Omar case, SecDef requested GOI's advocacy on recognizing U.S. jurisdiction over Colonel Joseph Romano under the NATO SOFA. Berlusconi expressed optimism that the matter will be resolved favorably during the appeals process. END SUMMARY.

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Afghanistan  
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¶2. (S/NF) Prime Minister Berlusconi opened the discussion with a lengthy discourse on the state of Italian national politics, assessing that his government is on solid ground. He asserted that "Italy wants to be the best friend of the United States." SecDef explained that both Presidents Bush and Obama believed this to be true. After briefly thanking Berlusconi for Italy's efforts in Haiti, SecDef applauded Italy's contributions to Afghanistan, noting that ISAF nations must loosen caveats to allow effective partnering with Afghan forces. SecDef explained that once the U.S. completes its force increases, there will be nearly 60,000 troops in RC-South -- too great a number for one commander. This was the reason for the proposal to split the command and create an RC-SW in Helmand and Nimroz provinces. SecDef promised that it would not intrude on Italian forces in RC-West. Berlusconi said he was satisfied that it will not be a problem.

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Iran

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13. (C) As a prelude to a detailed discussion on Iran, SecDef briefly outlined the phased adaptive approach to European Missile Defense, explaining that a revised threat assessment and better technology had led to the new approach. SecDef enlisted Italian support for a NATO commitment to missile defense at November's Lisbon Summit. SecDef recognized there were legitimate questions about cost and C2, and promised that the U.S. would provide detailed answers soon.

14. (S/NF) SecDef recalled his long involvement in U.S.-Iran relations, including his participation in the first U.S. meeting with the new revolutionary government in 1979. Noting that every American president since then has tried to reach out to Iran, SecDef asserted that President Obama's approach has been the most sincere, energetic and principled. He outlined the multiple opportunities -- including the Tehran Research Reactor proposal, the IAEA's inspection of the Qom facility, and multiple private offers for dialogue -- that Iran has been given to reassure the international community of its intentions. All of these approaches, however, have been rejected by Iran.

15. (S/NF) SecDef expressed deep disappointment in Tehran's lack of responsiveness, reminding Berlusconi that Italy's role is vital and pointing out the opportunity for leadership. SecDef explained that it was clearly time for a new UNSC resolution, which would give nations and the EU a legal basis for even harsher action. He recounted the dire consequences of a nuclear Iran, including proliferation by other countries in the Middle East, a military response by Israel at some point, or both. Sanctions must be applied to get Tehran to change course and agree to a negotiated solution.

16. (S/NF) Berlusconi agreed and recounted recent consultations with Israeli leaders, including military commanders, during his recent visit to Tel Aviv. Recalling the tragedy of the Holocaust, Berlusconi said he believes the Israelis will not follow the path of some German Jews in the 1930s, who discounted Hitler's threats as political demagoguery. Given Ahmadinejad's promises to eliminate the Israeli state, Berlusconi speculated that Tel Aviv would strike, possibly with nuclear weapons, against Iran if Tehran were close to acquiring nuclear weapons itself. He added that no one, including President Obama, could stop Israel if it sensed an existential threat -- noting his belief that Israel has operational plans on the shelf.

17. (S/NF) SecDef cited an Israeli military exercise that flew 842 kilometers to Greece, pointing out the distance between Israeli air bases and Iran's nuclear reactor is 840 kilometers. Berlusconi took the point, and asked the U.S. to exert strong leadership in pressuring Iran. He added that Iranian actions against protesters were morally unacceptable and he cautioned that sanctions should not target the general population but instead aim to weaken the government. SecDef explained the manifold business interests of the IRGC -- Ahmadinejad's "storm troopers" -- and his confidence that sanctions could be targeted against them without significantly harming the people.

18. (S/NF) Berlusconi noted that Italian businesses have had interests in Iran for 50 years. He referred to a particularly lucrative contract between the Italian energy company ENI and Iran that must be fulfilled in light of significant penalties for non-compliance. He asserted, however, that ENI has chosen not to renew the contract because of concerns about Tehran's actions. Berlusconi recounted conversations with Russia, saying he had lobbied them against missile production that can aid the Iranian military. Berlusconi said he would soon attend an EU Summit to address Iran, believing that a preemptive strike by Israeli on Iran would be disastrous. SecDef appreciated Berlusconi's sense of urgency, reminding him that history has consistently shown that tyrants are clear about their intentions and noting Ahmadinejad's promise to wipe Israel

from the map.

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Israel-Palestine  
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¶9. (S/NF) Berlusconi explained his efforts to get Palestinians back to the negotiating table by offering to host the negotiations and pay for all the costs. He detailed an idea he had introduced in 1994 about a "Marshall Plan" for the region, whereby he would entice the world's biggest companies and hotels to invest in the West Bank and build an airport there. He doubted Israel would allow investment to happen given the current circumstances, but said the offer is still on the table. SecDef agreed that we must work together and stated that the Middle East Peace Process would be one of President Obama's highest priorities in 2010. Berlusconi argued that the issue has global implications. SecDef concurred, noting that the global security environment is as complex as ever. He noted that we keep adding new problems like piracy to the list of challenges without solving the old ones.

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Africa  
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¶10. (C) In a brief exchange, Berlusconi noted his concern about the Horn of Africa. Because of Italy's colonial experience in Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, it had an acute understanding of the depravity of the region that allows problems like piracy to take root. SecDef commented that much of Africa had looked to the Soviet model in the post-colonial period -- an unfortunate choice that guaranteed poverty, and an error from which most of Africa has not yet recovered.

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China  
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¶11. (S/NF) Berlusconi recounted a recent trip to China by his daughter, a recent U.S. college graduate, which left her distraught. He explained that between urban migration and university graduates, China is adding 24M workers to its workforce each year. Italy has 23M workers in its entire economy -- in other words, China annually increases its workforce by the total size of Italy's. Berlusconi noted that many Italian companies will withdraw tenders if competing against a Chinese company, especially in Africa. SecDef noted that China has two major challenges. First, in Africa, natural resource extraction using imported Chinese labor is causing significant resentment among African hosts. Second, in order to add 20-30M jobs to its workforce yearly, China must grow its GDP by 8-10 percent each year. SecDef added that the source of internal stability in China is an improving quality of life for its citizens, and that Chinese leaders are "scared to death" that this is not sustainable.

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Romano Case  
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¶12. (S/NF) In closing, SecDef asked Berlusconi for his assistance in affirming U.S. jurisdiction over Colonel Romano, one of the defendants in the Abu Omar case, under the NATO SOFA. Berlusconi and Cabinet Advisor Letta assured SecDef the GOI was working hard to resolve the situation. Berlusconi gave an extended rant about the Italian judicial system -- which frequently targets him since it is "dominated by leftists" as the public prosecutor level. Berlusconi predicted that the "courts will come down in our favor" upon appeal, noting that higher-level appellate courts are significantly less politicized than local courts.

¶13. (U) SecDef has cleared this cable. Drafted by OSD Staff.  
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